

Preface

No Neutrals

In the spring of 2004 while conducting research on political consciousness in Nepal's universities, I was asked to give an interview to a political weekly, *Deshāntar* (Across the Country). Risha, a student activist I knew, said it would help publicize my research. I was hesitant. I did not want to draw undue attention during such a contentious period. *Deshāntar* seemed like the sort of mouthpiece (*mukh patra*) that Nepali political parties have. The newsstands are crowded with multiple daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals of every political stripe, and people know which mouthpiece represents which party. Risha admitted that *Deshāntar* journalists had direct access to Nepali Congress (NC) politicians and relied on them for analysis. But she assured me it was a respectable weekly that all people read, especially to understand the NC party line. I agreed to the interview but refused to answer any political questions. The interview was tame. The reporter asked me about my research, why I chose Nepal, and where I had traveled in the country. He even sent me proofs of the article.

The week of publication, I received an email from the director of the US Educational Foundation's (USEF) Nepal Fulbright Program asking if I was aware of the "exposé." When I explained that I had given an interview to *Deshāntar*, he asked me about an article in *Pratispardha* (Competition). The US embassy press attaché deemed the article bad publicity and forwarded it to the American Mission, the public relations office of the American Embassy in Nepal, which ordered him to refute the article's claims and demand a redaction. The article, attached to his email, was a brief biography of me in Nepali dismissing my claim to be a Fulbright researcher and asserting that I was an anti-Hindu CIA agent providing tactical support to the Maoists. It cited trips to the Maoist heartland—Rukum, Rolpa, and Dolpa—that I had taken during my college study abroad as proof.

Shocked to read my life details so grossly distorted, I immediately called Akash, another student leader, for advice. He informed me that *Pratispardha* was a small royalist mouthpiece, merely a tabloid. *Pratispardha* is published on Sunday instead of Friday like other weeklies, giving its writers time to peruse the competition and rewrite articles from a royalist bent. Their

viewpoint, he said, “was based not on fact but on manufactured lies” and “hence the name, *Pratispardha*—it means ‘competition.’” He congratulated me on being in good company. At various times, *Pratispardha* had depicted him as a Maoist, pro-Indian, and anti-nationalist to undermine his popularity. He explained that I had been targeted because of the *Deshāntar* article and asked why I had agreed to the interview. I told him that Risha had convinced me it would be good exposure. He laughed and said, “Well you received exposure for sure. Now everyone knows you are a threat to the monarchy. The activists [*āndolankāri haru*] will respect you.”

This was my first public foray into Nepali politics. During a period of heightened political upheaval, I found myself researching activists who were defying state sanctions with anti-monarchical protests and came to learn that “in a revolutionary situation, no neutrals are allowed” (Nash 1976: 150). The Maoists had been waging a war against the government for almost seven years, which ultimately claimed seventeen thousand lives. Villagers were caught in the cross fire between the Maoist army and state security forces, and everyone was vulnerable to the random bombs that were detonated in public places. There were victims on all sides. Nepal’s human rights record was disintegrating as the number of disappeared and murdered increased exponentially.¹ The US State Department had classified the Maoists as a terrorist organization until 2007 after an official cease-fire was brokered.

I did my best to resist advocacy because of the obvious complications it would bring to my informants and research, and my interlocutors were in any case capable in advocating for themselves. Instead, trying to avoid partisanship, I pitched my research as a non-biased exploration of Nepali student politics and their role in mainstream politics. A non-partisan approach turned out to be more challenging than I had expected, as my unwelcome publicity in *Pratispardha* demonstrates. I had little control over the way others perceived my research. My topic, Nepal’s political struggle, almost implicitly said something about me, the researcher (Henslin 1972). Even as I observed from the sidelines, the students referred to me as the “observer activist” (*avalokan garne āndolankāri*) or the “sideline activist” (*sīdmā basne āndolankāri*). When I rebuffed them, they challenged me, asking, “You don’t care what happens in Nepal?” Of course, I cared. I supported what the citizens wanted. In their view, this meant I supported them because they were fighting for the people’s right to decide Nepal’s future. To them I was an *āndolankāri*.²

Building rapport with the student activists meant I was “on their side” (Huizer 1973: 21), and outsiders placed me either where it suited them or

where it made obvious sense. In Nepal's political field, people interpret others' actions as indicative of the spheres they operate within, discerning filial, social, and political interconnections. The notion of lack of bias is self-defeating. What I saw as an ethical research approach, my interlocutors saw as a limiting act that removed the prospect of political opportunity, of expanding one's influence through reciprocity and indebtedness.

Neutrality became more complicated for me after 2006, when the students were no longer unified. From 2003 to 2006 their strength had come through their numbers afforded by political unity. I was studying their political movement, and so I needed to work with all of them. Between 2003 and 2006, the opposition lines were drawn between those fighting for a multiparty republic and royalist supporters. Since their establishment in the 1960s, there had been deep mistrust among the student organizations in Nepal, which varied in severity across different campuses. After the king was dethroned by the Second People's Movement in the spring of 2006, I observed the students revert to interparty competition and political machinations, which showed how alliances and splits affected their shared political culture.

Student leaders became resistant to my work with other student organizations. After 2006, the focus of my study shifted from the student movement to student organizations and their interorganizational and intra-organizational practices. Soon my study became something else for them to compete over, and they complained that I was no longer a daily part of their lives—that I had “gone missing.” This pressure pulled me in multiple directions as I attended separate meetings, going from campus to campus and juggling political programs throughout Kathmandu, missing key events when I had to choose between simultaneous political programs.

Nevertheless, I continued conducting a broad study of student politics. Satendra, the president of the All Nepal National Free Student Union (United) (ANNFSU [Akhil]), whom I had known for three years, had a penchant for attempting to undercut my claimed lack of bias. His machinations unwittingly connected me with Gyanu, the Maoist student president of the All Nepal National Independent Student Union (Revolutionary) (ANNISU [R]). During the 2006 peace talks, Satendra invited me to their rally to lobby their parties toward peace talk negotiations. When I arrived at their central committee's office, the secretary informed me that no rally was scheduled, but that nine student organizations were meeting to draft a joint statement demanding peace talks among the previous warring factions. It became apparent that Satendra strategically arranged for me to be sitting in his office when the other student leaders arrived. As others arrived, they greeted me

with familiarity. The Nepal Student Union (Democratic) (NSU [D]) president suggested that we all catch up over tea, to the annoyance of Satendra, who refused. The meeting began without tea and without me. Satendra instructed me to wait so we could continue our visit after their press release was drafted.

Although I felt inconvenienced, I sensed an opportunity and waited. As the leaders were waiting to sign the press release, I introduced myself to Gyanu, who kept avoiding eye contact. I knew most everyone in the room, so I was confident when I remarked: "I've worked with all these gentlemen and their organizations for the past three years. You've been underground, so your organization is the missing link in my research. I hope I can work with you." He had been ignoring my phone calls and my research assistant's appointment requests. Our serendipitous meeting among the other student leaders assuaged his suspicion of me as a foreigner and convinced him that the other student leaders took me seriously. After that day, he answered my call, and within a week we scheduled our first meeting. Through that chance encounter, I was able to make inroads into the Maoist student union, and Gyanu became one of my long-term informants.

Through the unexpected challenges of forging relationships in Nepal's political terrain, I came to understand the field and actors within it. The limitations I experienced were the realities that structured my interlocutors' sociality. By working within the constraints of the field, I observed how Nepali politics works as a series of interparty and interpersonal alliances and competitions. More often than not we bonded over our shared experience of having no control as we tried to make sense of the ongoing political uncertainty together. The students let me in because I was trying to figure out politics, while they were figuring out their place in it. And through our fumbling we co-produced a particular reality, albeit for different ends. Our dialogical interaction was "embedded in both macro and micro social relations which defy a reduction to a simple equation of a powerful ethnographer operationalizing a research project focused on research subjects" (Holmberg 2011: 98). In that regard, the students and I were kindred spirits. Our connection came from leveraging each other in our own personal agendas: theirs political and mine research.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS POLITICAL PROCESS

An anthropological focus on democracy and social action must explore competing constructions of what is political: contested meanings, forms of power, and resistance (Paley 2002). It requires crafting ethnography as

open-ended analysis to elucidate the ongoing epistemic and social contestation of political process. This ethnography captures the dynamism and stagnation of Nepali political life during the country's political transition in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Political actors' conceptions and categories, relational interactions, and political rituals and the forms their political imaginary embodies are analyzed to apprehend what is political to them.

The sustained long-term nature of this research has allowed me to understand politics as process, emerging from action and interaction. The student activists of the twenty-first century's first decade provided me a firsthand view into how they have shaped democracy through contestation and contradiction as they have negotiated what it meant for them both individually and on the communal level. Through the ebbs and flows of their successes and failures, I have come to understand the complexity of Nepali politics. My interlocutors are not merely invested in ideology; they are personally invested in the political networks and opportunities they see as their professional future.

This ethnography is based on research totaling thirty-four months from 2003 to 2015, in Kathmandu, with multiple field trips to over twenty-five districts in Nepal, and on archival research in Delhi and Varanasi, India. My research was a top-down project. I worked at the political center in Kathmandu with the central committees of the student organizations and political parties, from which I followed the students' political activities on campuses and in districts throughout the country. I worked across party and student organization lines with major political players.³ The rapport I established with the student activists in 2003 during their ongoing protests provided me a firsthand view into their lives as activists, on the streets, underground, and in the hospitals, courts, and jails. During this tumultuous period, I was able to observe their internal organizational processes, their interorganizational collaborations and competitions on campuses, and their relationships with political party leaders. I was invited to students' and politicians' homes and into their daily lives, where I observed how they incorporate politics into the personal and the personal into their politics.

My day-to-day research differed quite significantly during the political movements (2003–6) and afterward during the peace talks, the Constituent Assembly (CA) elections, and state restructuring (2006–14). During the protest period, I followed students on the streets, observing their protest rallies, and attended programs that the student unions and political parties held on campuses and at other public gathering places, where I listened to

political speeches or just passed the time with students, who passively participated by being present but who also used these gatherings to socialize with their peers and rub elbows with party leaders. I visited student central committee and campus offices to observe the students' daily activities beyond the streets. In the evenings, I made the rounds to hospitals and jails with student leaders who were providing financial and moral support to their injured and detained cadres. I attended official and clandestine meetings between cadres and leaders whenever I was invited. I also followed student activists to their party leaders' houses or offices, in the morning before the day's activities began, where they paid homage, garnered political support or advice, registered complaints, elicited funds, and coordinated activities. During the Free Student Union (FSU) elections, I traveled to multiple campuses and observed the campaigning, voting, and ballot tallying, which gave me comparative data on competition in and among the student unions.

I also conducted formal and informal interviews with over one hundred student and party cadres, student leaders, ex-student leaders, politicians, ministers, campus chiefs and other faculty, policy makers, political analysts, and journalists, as well as international actors who supported the political process. I befriended a number of journalists and analysts with whom I regularly met to exchange reflections. Despite being rigorous, much of my research was spent having tea with interlocutors either waiting for something to happen or processing what had happened. During tea, I became familiar with the sociality of politics, which included moments of honesty but more often diplomacy, patience, and uncertainty while idling away the time between the big political moments.

After the 2006 political movement, I focused on the student unions' internal processes as they retreated back onto the campuses and out of the national spotlight. The post-peace talk period from 2006 through 2008 was heralded as a hopeful time. Yet for the students it was tinged with stagnation and uncertainty, as they waited for their parties to negotiate a new political frontier. I observed the student leaders' tense efforts to work cooperatively at the central committee level, while they also recognized that they were again competing with one another. I followed the conventions of the three largest student unions at the campus, district, and national levels, during 2006 and 2007, in preparation for the CA elections. And I shadowed student politicians through their CA election campaigns. Through my travels throughout the country, I observed students' role in national- and campus-level campaigns.

In 2009 and 2011, I returned to connect with student leaders and cadres whom I had maintained contact with throughout my research. I formally and informally interviewed them about contemporary political events at the national, party, and student organization levels. By this time many of them were transitioning into party positions, some successfully due to their popularity or established patronage connections, while others were stuck in a limbo between student leadership and minor party positions. During my research work through 2015, I consistently connected with the five student leaders whose narratives are featured in this book. I took all five of their life stories and questioned them on topics I had been asking them since 2003 to understand how their perspectives had changed over time and with experience.

